

Teaching Young Adult Literature

Why Should We Have All the Fun? Encouraging Colleagues to Read YA Novels across the Curriculum

“So, what do the kids talk about when you teach a book?”

This was the question posed to me by the science teacher in my school after finally giving in to my pleas to use YAL in her classroom. For months I had tried to convince her to break away from the “old standby” (textbook) and implement something “fresh and different” (YAL) as the foundation for the concepts discussed in her class. And while she was pretty much game from the get-go, some hesitancy seemed to stem not from the reading itself, but rather from her confusion about *how* to discuss and use literature in a meaningful manner.

Recently, NCTE helped create the National Center for Literacy Education (NCLE) to help support literacy across all disciplines. NCLE Director Kent Williamson notes, “Schools that sustain progress in literacy learning pay attention to the little things and the big things. They create organizational conditions that promote

communication about student learning across disciplines and outside of classroom walls. They expect their faculty to deepen their knowledge not only about content, but about how kids learn, and they give them the flexibility to act on their findings” (<http://www.ncte.org/press/ncle>).

For English teachers, discussions like this are an essential part of what happens within our classrooms nearly every day. Such discussion not only helps solidify concepts for students, it also allows them to make personal connections with texts, connections that will remain with them long after they leave our classrooms.

But for teachers who deal primarily in facts, dates, and numbers, creating relevant discussion topics and valuable questions based on fiction or literary non-fiction can be a struggle. And because of this, I’ve decided to dedicate this column to those non-English teachers we know who are looking for a new way to approach things.

And that’s where you step in.

Step One: Find the right teachers.

We all know teachers in other subjects who push the envelope a

bit with their teaching methods and strategies (at least I *hope* you know people like this). These are the ones I would encourage you to approach with an idea such as this. Simply put, the “read the textbook, fill in the worksheet” teacher probably isn’t going to play along too well with this idea (unfortunately, I am *positive* you know people like this). If you do want to try it with them, however, please be prepared for the insightful response, “Why would I do that? You’re the English teacher!”

Step Two: Give them books to read.

Next, casually offer your colleagues a book or two to read. Pick novels that not only relate to their subjects but ones that also have high teen appeal. I would also recommend avoiding the whole “I really think you should teach this in your class!” comment too early. (Remember, most of these people work with numbers, experiments, and historical documents—they may scare easily.)

Step Three: Sniff around for their response.

Once they have finished the book, sniff around to get an idea of what

your colleagues thought. I think it is important to remember that just because *you* love a book and think it would be great for their class doesn't mean that *they* will feel passionately about it. For this concept to work successfully, there needs to be *complete* teacher buy-in, so if the story itself doesn't get a thumbs-up, there is no need to press the point. Instead, this just means that you have to keep trying.

Step Four: "Have you ever thought of teaching a novel in your class?"

Once your colleagues have approved of a book, this is where you spring into action! Talk to them about why literature is such a valuable teaching tool, and present them with specific curricular connections that this novel offers. If they are still talking to you at this point, this would be a good time to suggest that they give using a novel in their class a try.

Step Five: Support. Support. Support.

Once your colleague agrees to try using literature in a class, your job is to offer any support you can to make this a successful experience. After all, your goal is not to have your colleagues teach one book in their classes; it's to get them to regularly teach books in their classes! Supporting them means assisting in creating discussion questions, helping them link what they already do to concepts within the text, and coming up with relevant and engaging writing prompts. Even better, if it is possible at your school, I would

highly suggest team-teaching a couple times throughout the unit. (Besides being beneficial to the learning, it's always fun to freak the kids out every now and then by showing them that we are all in cahoots with one another.)

Step Six: Let them know you appreciate their efforts.

As you go through all this, please remember to thank your colleagues and to let them know that you really admire what they are doing. Change is tough, and a simple sign of appreciation goes a long way.

Step Seven: Take it to the next level.

Finally, after you have helped other teachers successfully teach a novel or two, it's time to take things to the next level. If your school has an all-school read (where everyone in a grade/school reads the same book), propose that several classes conspire together to create a showcase project. Allow students to select which subject best connects to the novel, then have them create a project that corresponds with this class. Again, this is a simple way that shows the value that reading holds across the *entire* curriculum.

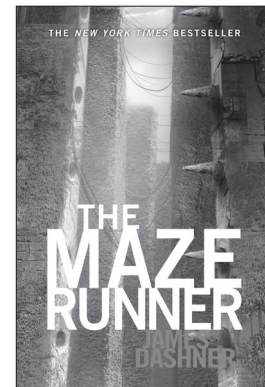
Book Suggestions for Non-ELA Teachers

Now I know what you're thinking: "Yeah, this all sounds great, but I wouldn't even know where to start."

Well, lucky for you, I've got your back.

The Maze Runner by James Dashner (Delacorte, 2009) (history, government, ethics, art)

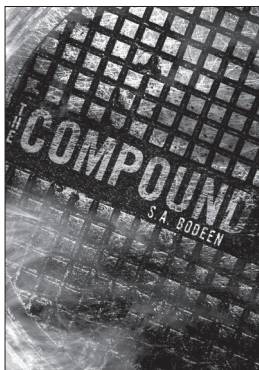
Thomas wakes up in an elevator, remembering nothing but his name. As he adapts to his new home, he struggles to understand the rules and regulations of his enclosed environment. Living among several dozen other "Gladers," Thomas and company begin the quest to escape the ever-changing maze that surrounds them. The nonstop action, mixed with the mystery of "WICKED" (the group behind the creation of the maze), will leave students begging you for the sequels (*The Scorch Trials* and *The Death Cure*).



Because of the way the boys have established their existence, the novel links easily to a history or government class centered on studying how various governments were created. In addition, an ethics class could connect with this story by studying the concept of how far is *too* far to go in the name of humanity. Finally, an art class could create a three-dimensional version of the Glade, complete with Grievors.

The Compound by S. A. Bodeen
(Feiwel & Friends, 2008)
(science, history, art, math)

It has been six years since Eli and his family sought shelter in the compound. And while he and his family have adapted to their new environment (an exact, underground replica of their above-ground mansion), problems slowly emerge that challenge their way of life (including the jaw-dropping “supplements,” an alternative source of meat). As time wears on, Eli begins to question the loss of his brother, his own sanity, and true reasons why they must live in the compound.

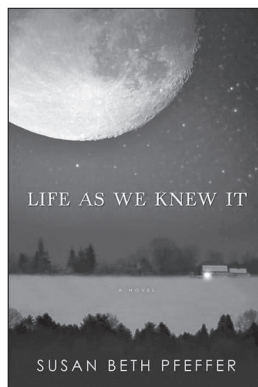


Creating an underground world also creates numerous cross-curricular links. First, science or ethic classes that discuss cloning will have more than enough to keep them going with this one. Next, history classes that are studying corruption of power will easily connect with the role that Eli's father plays in the story. Additionally, students in an art class could draw (or create) a scale model of the compound. Finally, a math class could do a unit on rationing and measurement based around the supplies kept in the compound. There are lots of options with this book.

Life as We Knew It by Susan Beth Pfeffer (Graphia, 2008) (science, technology)

After a meteor knocks the moon closer to Earth, Miranda's life (and the rest of the world) is turned upside-down. Earthquakes, tsunamis, and volcano eruptions wipe out a large portion of the world's population, while at the same time creating chaos with the seasons and the natural resources needed to survive (including water and sunlight). As winter approaches, Miranda and her family struggle to survive the never-ending obstacles thrown their way.

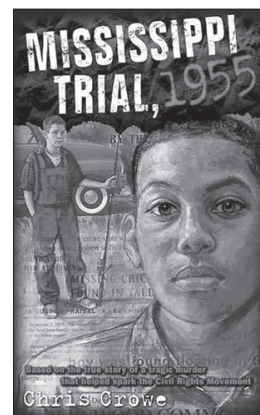
This novel would be a great supplement to an astronomy class that studies tides and natural disasters. It would also be useful within the context of a biology/ecology/botany class that studies the impact that plants and animals have on our daily lives. It would also be a useful tool for a technology class studying the impact that power and computers have on contemporary society. Or, if you're feeling extra crazy, maybe have half the class read *Life as We Knew It* (based in a small, rural town), while the other half reads the companion novel *The Dead and the Gone* (based in New York City). Splitting the class reading



like this, while challenging, leads to some great compare/contrast discussions.

Mississippi Trial, 1955 by Chris Crowe (Speak, 2003)
(history, government, sociology)

Historical fiction that is both educational and appealing to kids is tough to come by, but this



novel, based around the murder of 14-year-old Emmett Till, accomplishes both. Narrator Hiram Hillburn spent his childhood years enjoying all that the South has to offer. Years later, however, upon visiting his grandfather, he begins to see it in a completely different light. The use of primary source documents, along with the likeability of Hiram, makes this an easy sell to students.

The cross-curricular link to an American history curriculum is obvious (it's a great starting point for the civil rights movement, predating Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott), but it could also be used to examine the US justice system in a government class (complete with a trip to the county courthouse). Additionally, the internal struggle Hiram goes through regarding truth versus reality is

something students in a civics/sociology class would enjoy studying.

Tuesdays with Morrie by
Mitch Albom (Broadway, 2002)
(science, sociology)

(So, before you even say it, yes, I know this technically isn't a YA novel. But after years of teaching this, I can tell you that the teen appeal to this one is off the charts. Don't believe me? Try it and get back to me.)

After graduating from college, author Mitch Albom left behind his dream of playing music for that of being a successful sports writer. Years later, while flipping through the channels, he stumbles across a piece about his former professor Morrie Schwartz and his battle with ALS. Inspired, Mitch reconnects with his mentor and rediscovers what it means to live life to its fullest.

The most straightforward connection with this story would be

to a genetics unit in science. Students could research ALS, present on the various symptoms, and then identify famous people (including Stephen Hawking) who have suffered from this terrible disease. A second option would be to use this novel in a sociology class. There are all kinds of connections to be made, including what we value in life, what makes a person successful, and how we deal with difficult situations. The story is also great for getting students to overcome fear of the elderly (and if you think young students don't suffer from this, think again). I accomplish this by setting up interviews with senior citizens from a local community center. While initially hesitant about the project, by the end of the second interview, students leave with a better appreciation of what our elders have to offer (along with a variety of great stories about what their senior partner accomplished).

Connecting Books with Contemporary Teens

An important idea to remember when confronting your colleagues about using YAL in the classroom is to let them know that they don't need to teach it the same way you would. Explain to them that these novels should be used to *supplement* their curricula, not to *replace* them. The primary function of using YAL across all disci-

plines is to help students connect with and better understand what they are learning in class. We all know that teaching great literature involves much more than the symbolism and foreshadowing that we all love to discuss, but "outsiders" often overlook this.


It's your job to help them figure this out.

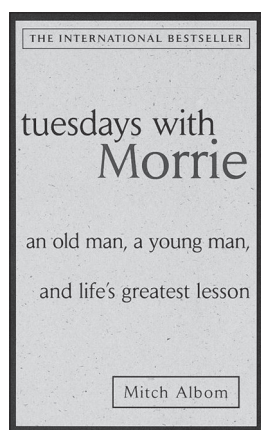
One last thing. As you can probably guess, all these novels and ideas fit just as well in an English curriculum; so if there's an idea or two discussed that you don't want to share, that's fine. But at the same time, literacy is something that students should see as a valuable skill for life, not just for English class. And because of this, I'm hopeful that each of you is able to take these ideas to a colleague who might be able to help spread the love of literacy across all subjects. After all, why should we English teachers be the only ones having fun?

And let me be clear: this is by no means the end-all-be-all list. Even more great ideas will be addressed in the January issue. But if you can't wait until then, here are two links that should help you in finding the right books for you and your colleagues.

<http://www.ala.org/yalsa/booklists/bbya>

<http://www.teenreads.com/reviews>

Good luck! 



Mike Roberts teaches eighth-grade English at Rowland Hall Middle School in Salt Lake City, Utah. Beyond the classroom, he has spent the past several years presenting to teachers and librarians from across the country about the benefits of using young adult literature in the classroom. For more information about this column, its ideas, or future suggestions, please feel free to email him at mikeroberts@rowlandhall.org.